

‘Diskarte’ in times of crises

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On the first day of the Metro-wide lockdown imposed by the government to contain the COVID-19 virus, I finished reading Christopher Hudson’s “The Killing Fields.” Based partly on the screenplay of the award-winning film with the same title, the book tells the story of New York Times’ journalist Sydney Schanberg and of his Cambodian assistant/interpreter Dith Pran at the time of the collapse of the Cambodian government in 1975, and the subsequent ordeal of Pran under the brutal Khmer Rouge regime.

After escaping execution by the Khmer Rouge by pretending that he was an uneducated man, Dith Pran had to work long hours in the open-pit mines of Dam Dek, east of Siem Reap. Like the other workers, he suffered from malnutrition, having to settle with his daily ration of 150 grams of rice in exchange for the backbreaking work of a slave. But unlike the others, Pran was resourceful. On the few square feet of land around his small hut in stilts at the far-end of the village, he grew tomatoes, tobacco and squash plants. However, the Khmer Rouge guards frowned upon this resourcefulness. Upon discovering Pran’s vegetable plot, they kicked his squash plants and uprooted his tomato plants, and told Pran, “It will no longer be necessary for the individual to supplement his diet! Angka will supply everything! In spite of his rage, Pran controlled his emotions. He knew that if he questioned authority, he dies.

It is uncanny how Pran’s experience under the Khmer Rouge mirrors what is now happening in our country. Proactive action and resourcefulness (or ‘diskarte’ as we say it in Filipino) seem to be frowned upon by the powers-that-be in this time of crisis. Illustrative is the case of Pasig Mayor Vico Sotto, who acted resolutely to deal with the challenges brought about by the epidemic.

He implemented a series of well-thought-out actions that endeared him not only among his constituents but also among netizens. He was quick in setting up a Rescue Emergency Disaster (RED) Training Center back on March 8 to prepare for the effects of COVID-19, and then proceeded with disinfecting public places, and with setting up community kitchens that prepared meals for those affected by the lockdown. Pasig also did immediate contact tracing and quarantine of those who had been in contact with COVID-19 patients.

After the Luzon-wide quarantine was announced, he pleaded with the national government to allow some tricycles to operate to serve as transportation for health workers, for staff assigned to perform essential services, and for emergencies. “Our risk assessment shows that we cannot completely ban tricycles,” he said, after determining the situation faced by his constituents. He added: “Sana makita po ng mga ginagalang nating lider—na may perspektibo kami sa LGU na maaaring di nakikita mula sa mas mataas.” What he got as a response was a rebuke from Malacañang, which said the national government calls the shots in a crisis, not the LGUs. President Duterte, in an apparent reference to Sotto, even threatened local officials with administrative and criminal charges if they do not strictly follow the lockdown guidelines. Now, wasn’t that an

overreaction over a genuine plea? Should he have not instead offered the LGUs support to help them enforce the guidelines more effectively?

In “The Killing Fields,” Dith Pran wondered where the rice surpluses went, having once been to a communal storage depot and seeing enough rice there to feed the whole province of Siem Reap for a month. To him, it was a mystery that they were given so little to eat when there is so much that could be distributed to them. Again, the parallelism to what is happening now is uncanny.

One can’t help but wonder why it is the Office of the Vice President, with its small budget allocation, that is taking the lead in providing free transportation service and personal protective equipment (PPEs) to health workers in Metro Manila. Is it not fair to expect the Department of Transportation (DOTr) and the Department of Health (DOH), given their mandates and much bigger resources, to be at the forefront of these efforts instead?

Moreover, the Office of the President has vast powers and resources, including several billion pesos from the President’s discretionary and social funds—have these funds not been utilized for programs meant to address the COVID-19 crisis? Why is there still a shortage of testing kits for our people and of PPEs for our front liners? Why we haven’t seen more concrete action from the concerned government agencies is a mystery to me.

Given that the quarantine is now on its third week, the expectation is that the DOH should have already identified locations, and set up laboratories and testing facilities in addition to the Research Institute of Tropical Medicine (RITM) and the San Lazaro Hospital in Manila to rapidly augment testing capacity. DOH has yet to reveal its plan for this.

In the meantime, we were surprised by Marikina Mayor Marcelino Teodoro, who announced that the city government is ready to set up its own COVID-19 testing center. However, it could not proceed because the DOH disapproved the proposed center on the grounds that it does not meet strict biosafety standards. While we recognize the DOH’s ultimate authority in deciding matters of public health, one cannot help but be frustrated by what is happening. There is clearly something wrong when, in a time of crisis, proactive efforts by LGUs are dampened, and improvised solutions are discouraged, not only by a paralyzing bureaucracy but also by an insensitive national leadership.

The Khmer Rouge promised that “Angka will supply everything!” As a result, millions of Cambodians died under probably the bleakest chapter in its history. I hope that there will be no similar situation here in our country.

[Note: This piece first appeared on March 29, 2020 in manilastandard.net. Several weeks later, the Department of Transportation took over the free shuttle service for front liners that the Office of the Vice President operated for one month. Department of Health Secretary Duque praised Marikina City’s COVID testing center, saying it is “one of the best I’ve seen”; the Pasig City government allocated more than one billion pesos of its own funds to aid its residents not included in the list of beneficiaries of the Social Amelioration Program of the National Government; while the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-EID) announced that it has adopted a “national-government-enabled, local government unit (LGU)-led, and people-centered” response to the COVID-19 pandemic.]